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Play Like a Girl

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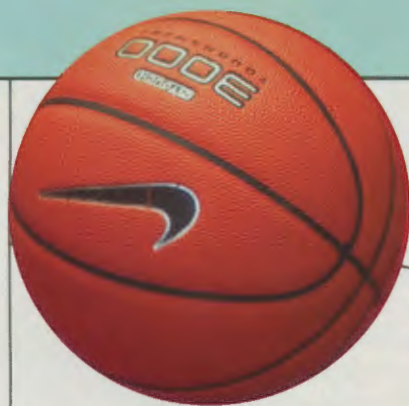
A young man with short brown hair and a serious expression is looking directly at the camera. He is wearing a blue Under Armour t-shirt and holding a basketball with both hands in front of him. The background is a large, empty arena with red seats, suggesting a basketball court. The lighting is focused on the man, with the rest of the arena in shadow.

I am alone inside Hilton Coliseum, and it's eerie. Quiet. Dark. I walk around the concourse, my squeaking snow-covered shoes making the only sound in the arena. Man, that is loud, I think to myself. The building is dark except for a small section of light highlighting the court, a soft glow that seems to touch only the hardwood while leaving all the seats in darkness.

I've been inside Hilton many times for concerts and games, but never before have I been here alone. Thousands of empty seats. And I don't have a phobia of open spaces, but today, at this moment, I can relate. The vastness is nearly overwhelming.

I make my way down a set of stairs in the northeast corner, and about 30 rows from the floor, I take a seat and wait. Women's basketball practice is scheduled to start in 10 minutes. Now without the noise from my shoes, Hilton is silent, calm.

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Suddenly the quiet is broken by a familiar sound: a basketball bouncing. It echoes through the empty arena, from far away at first, then closer. *Thud! Thud! Thud!* I don't know where it's coming from. And then I see a figure step from the darkness behind the basket and into the soft light on the floor, still dribbling the ball.

It's a guy with black hair, maybe 5'7", wearing gray mesh shorts, blue-and-white basketball shoes, and a black pullover jersey, the kind you probably once wore in gym class. The number 5 has been crudely applied to the front and back in masking tape.

About 20 feet from the basket, he turns and takes a jump shot ... *clang!* The ball bounces away from him, and he chases it to the other half of the court.

Then three guys, all wearing the same style of practice clothes as number 5 but with different masking-tape numbers, step from the darkness and onto the hardwood. For a few minutes they shoot baskets. Casually, and without much talk, the men of the practice squad warm up.

Members of the squad shoot, rebound, and scrimmage right alongside the Cyclones at every women's practice. Ask the women's basketball coaches about this year's success, and you'll hear about the dozen men on the scout team—guys like seniors Jason Seehusen and Aaron Royster, who played some high school basketball and joined the practice team as a way to keep the game in their lives.

So the women's team's success, and the role the scout squad plays in it, is the reason I'm sitting here alone on this snowy Thursday, watching four average-looking basketball players shoot jumpers on the Hilton hardwood. But I suppose this isn't entirely true. The real reason I'm here, and probably the reason you're still reading this story, is because the idea of men and women being pitted against each other in direct athletic competition sparks curiosity in our minds. It's peculiar, unnatural, forbidden. Men and women do not belong together on the same court, right?



First half

As I'm mulling this over, members of the women's basketball team emerge two or three at a time from the locker-room tunnel and join the shootaround. The hoopsters scatter to shoot at extra baskets that have been wheeled in and placed around the perimeter of the floor. Then, like generals surveying a battlefield, the coaches saunter onto the scene and gather at center

court, whistles dangling from their necks, seemingly oblivious to the chaos of squeaking shoes, bouncing basketballs, and commotion now taking place. Head Coach Bill Fennelly, in a navy hooded sweatshirt and gray sweatpants, stands surrounded by his assistants Jack Easley, Jodi Steyer, and Latoja Harris.

Earlier, probably about the same time I was making my way through the dark concourse, the scout team had gathered in the women's basketball team offices. It's Coach Harris's responsibility to teach the scout team the offense of the Cyclones' next opponent. College teams can take weeks to master an offense, the scout team has 10 minutes. The women will play the University of Colorado Saturday, so now the men are huddled around Coach Harris, paying special attention to the individual scouting reports of the Colorado players. Later on at practice, each scout team member will be expected to mirror their counterpart on the Colorado team. For example, tonight, Jason will represent Veronica Johns-Richardson, a starting guard for the Buffaloes. She wears number 5, so for this practice Jason wears a masking-tape 5. She's a decent 3-point shooter; it's Jason's job to shoot 3s. It's his job to mimic Johns-Richardson this afternoon so the Cyclones will know how to guard her Saturday.

Back on the floor, practice is in full swing. The women's team works on defending a common Colorado play, one designed to free up Johns-Richardson for a catch-and-shoot 3-pointer. The Cyclones are supposed to defend this play by aggressively guarding the 3-point line. "I want your toes on that line," Fennelly tells the women. He squats down at the edge of the court, about where he would be if this were the real game, and scans the Cyclones' defense for any signs of weakness. The scout team runs the play, the ball comes to Jason, and he takes his shot. He sinks it.

"Toes on the line!" Fennelly shouts to the women as he rises from his crouch. "Again."

They run the play once more. This time Jason misses, but Fennelly seems twice as upset. His brow crumples in an angry scowl.

"It's not good enough!"

"Enough" echoes through the arena, and for the first time since practice began, Hilton is quiet. They all stop and look at him. Then their eyes turn to the floor in shame.

"You've got to play right on the line," Fennelly says gently this time. He shakes his head like he's struggling to comprehend what's keeping the women from effectively defending the play.

"Again."

The scout team runs the play 19 more times, each time Fennelly shouting instructions to the women.

As the scenario gets repeated again and again, I begin to notice the ferocious physical play under the basket. Cyclone forward Mary Fox is knocked to the floor by a scout teamer going up for the rebound. The next play, Fox sticks an elbow in his ribs while she boxes him out, then stares him down with a go-to-hell look in the few seconds before the play begins again for the umpteenth time. The intensity of the practice has picked up. The men certainly aren't holding back, and the women aren't taking any shit.

This is something I wondered about before I came to practice. Would the women have to fight like hell to have a chance against the guys? Or would the women be so good they'd crush



the scout team in practice? Basically, I wondered, who is better: the scout team or the Cyclones? A few hours ago, I would have guessed the women. After all, it seems illogical that a Division I women's basketball team would have any problems pounding on a team made up of guys the assistant coaches found at the Rec. Now, I'm not so sure. The scout team is taller. They snag more rebounds. They jump a little higher. Their shots are a bit more pure.

Half time

When practice is over, I stop Coach Harris to clear things up: Why is it that men are on the practice squad instead of women?

"We use guys because, at this age, guys are a lot stronger and a little more skilled. Girls are just not as strong or as coordinated," Harris says, as she folds her arms across the Cyclone logo of her navy sweatshirt. "We want the best basketball players on the scout team we can find." And that means men.

"Five on five, the scout team versus the women's starters," I ask Coach Harris, "who wins?"

She pauses for a second, looking into the distance. "I think it would be a close match. In the end, the guys would take it, but it wouldn't be a blowout."

It strikes me as being the only time I've ever heard of a prac-

tice team being able to beat the varsity. "Because the guys are better basketball players or because they're superior athletes in general?" I ask her.

"Athletically, the guys could totally dominate our players, but that's not what we want. We make them play a particular role, and they do a good job at it."

To Harris and the rest of the coaches, the role-playing is priority number one for the scout team. Dribble like she dribbles, pass like she passes, shoot like she shoots. The emphasis for the scout team is on mimicking, not making baskets.

"If she shoots left handed, then I want him shooting with his left hand at practice, even if he normally shoots right handed," Harris says. "The hardest thing for our scout team guys is that they can't be themselves here. Every practice they become someone different. And sometimes they can get frustrated."

"All right, Coach Harris, where do you find these guys who don't care about scoring points?"

"Sometimes it's by word of mouth—some of our players already play with guys in the summer and we'll find them that way," she says. "Or I'll go over to the Rec on a Tuesday or Wednesday night when there are a lot of people there and actually scout them, ask them if they're interested. We've been lucky to find some good guys who are really interested in helping the program."





Second Half

Jason and Aaron live together in an apartment on West Street. The décor is typical of most all-male living spaces: empty white walls, an unused kitchen, pop cans and clothes taking up most of the available floor and table space. I feel right at home as I make my way into their living room. Someone in the apartment above them is blasting "Born in the U.S.A." by Bruce Springsteen, and the song is loud enough in the room for us to acknowledge its presence in the form of a joke at Springsteen's expense. They have a big TV against one wall across from a long black couch, a short black couch, and a sitting chair, which all surround a cluttered coffee table. A lone halogen lamp provides the lighting for the living room. The setup isn't pretty, but utilitarian nonetheless.

Aaron clears a little space on the coffee table for my tape recorder, then reclines comfortably into the corner of the long couch. He is lanky and tall, with short brown hair and sharp facial features. He's the only lefty on the scout team and usually plays forward in practice.

Jason is much shorter, a guard who can handle the ball well, shoot the three, and take it to the basket. I think he is Coach Harris' favorite; his name finds its way into most of her anecdotes. Both Jason and Aaron are wearing sweatpants and T-shirts.

"So how'd you guys get involved with the scout team?" I ask them.

"Oh, I played basketball in high school but gave it up when I got to college, and I was really starting to miss it," Aaron says as he scoots forward in the couch. Now he leans over the coffee table, his face half a foot from the tape recorder, and says, "I played at the Rec but that was getting old because some of the guys there aren't very good."

"You guys don't have to get that close," I interrupt, nodding at the recorder. "The mic will pick you up."

Aaron struggles for a moment to suppress a sheepish smile, then leans back into the corner of the couch. He continues, talking to me now instead of the recorder. "I was coaching Ames Park League basketball two summers ago, and I met Coach Steyer there. She had seen me coaching the kids and asked if I wanted to start playing at a women's practices."

The person upstairs starts the song again. This time it's even louder, so we have to raise our voices to hear each other.

"I played with some of the guys on the scout team and some players during pickup games at Beyer over the summer," Jason volunteers. The guys on the scout team refer constantly to the members of the women's team as "players." "The players asked me to come to a practice when the season started, and Coach Harris told me I could keep coming back."

"So why did you?" I ask.

Jason starts to tell me about growing up as a Cyclone fan when he gets cut off by a pounding noise coming through the ceiling. The three of us look up. I think the Springsteen nut is

dancing.

Jason rolls his eyes, then continues a little louder now: "So I've always been a Cyclone fan, and since I'm not good enough to play men's basketball here, it's as close as I can get to actually being on a college basketball team. I'm friends with all the players. I get to play basketball at Hilton Coliseum, which is something most people don't get to do, and I get a behind-the-scenes look at a D-1 team through a season."

"What did your buddies say when you guys quit going to the Rec and started playing on the scout team? I mean, did they give you any shit for choosing to play against girls?"

"Yeah, a little at first," says Aaron. "Just because we're playing against women, they assume we'll hurt them. And they're usually surprised to find out the women hurt us back. But the first question they always ask is whether we beat them. Then when we say 'yes,' they think we're just being cocky."

But they don't care what people say. Jason and Aaron know that the women's team plays better basketball than anything you'd see at the Rec, and it's the game, not who is playing it, that matters most to them.



Buzzer

Now I get it. I mean the men versus women thing. Now it doesn't seem so strange. In fact, it's very logical: The women need the men on the scout team because it's to their benefit to practice against the best basketball players they can find. And for the men, the scout team provides them with one last chance to play a game they love, to play it the way the game is supposed to be played.

And it doesn't really matter that some people aren't comfortable with men knocking women to the floor chasing a rebound, or whether or not the scout squad can beat the women's team. What does matter, what the scout team is all about, is making the women's basketball program better.

And for the men, the scout team provides them with one last chance to play a game they love, to play it the way the game is supposed to be played.

